If the Metaverse Becomes an Ontological Event

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ABSTRACT

It is essential to analyze the state, significance, and issues of the Metaverse as a possible world from an ontological perspective. The Metaverse is an on going ontological event. Despite its status as a possible world beyond the real world, its actors are still human beings from the real world. It is thus impossible for the Metaverse to transcend the fundamental problems of human life, as the issues of politics, capital, and ideology still take place in a recursive manner. Therefore, the Metaverse does not have its own independent ontology, but shares the ontology of the real world. To conclude, the Metaverse may change people's lives, but not ontology.

KEYWORDS

Metaverse; Ontological event; Possible world

1   Introduction: A "death foretold"

The year 2021 is called the "advent" of the Metaverse,[1] yet the thrilling title might just be the exaggerated slogan of a new industry. It remains to be seen whether the Metaverse will come true and whether it will have the hyped magic. In truth, many have voiced reservations. Nonetheless, I am more concerned with the philosophical problems that the Metaverse poses as a possible world, which are unrelated to its commercial values or feasibility. Admittedly, the current development of virtual reality, blockchain, and artificial intelligence appears to be inadequate for the envisioned Metaverse, but the ontological question arising from technology has already taken shape, regardless of whether the Metaverse will become a reality.

The "Advent of the Metaverse" is almost a "Death Foretold" (if I may borrow from Márquez).[2] The victim here is not a living person, but the meaning of life in the real world, along with the concepts of reality, destiny, history, and experience, even that of humans. As shown in the Greek tragedies, the inevitable fate is the fundamental problem of human existence, and the Metaverse may just be an inevitable fate of humanity.

The problem sounds somewhat paradoxical: In the endeavors to establish subjectivity, exerting dominance over all, and humans have designed for themselves a self-negating destiny. Will the advent of the Metaverse mark the end of history?

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1 Zhao Guodong, Yi Huanhuan, Xu Yuanzhong: «元宇宙»(Metaverse), China Translation & Publishing House, 2021 ed., Preface, p. 5.

2 [Colombia] Márquez: «加西亚·马尔克斯中短篇小说集»(Collected Stories), translated by Zhao Deming, Liu Ying, etc., Shanghai Translation Publishing House, 1982 ed., pp. 617-711.

2   The Metaverse is a concept without limitation

The concept of the Metaverse as used today has richer connotations than that put forward by the science fiction writer Neal Stephenson in 1992. It has become a concept without boundary, undefinable due to the infinite technological prospects.

Nonetheless, it may be problematic to translate "Metaverse" into "元宇宙" (literally "primal universe") in Chinese. The original meaning of "universe" is a world of unified beings. The idea of unification indicates that there is only one universe.[3] Modern physicists conjecture that there may be several universes existing independently with no connection to one another (concepts such as "wormholes" are still fictional). Logicians admit that there are multiple possible worlds that may be interconnected .

As the Metaverse cannot be independent of the real world, it can only be a new possible world rather than a self-standing and self-sufficient universe. It would be exaggerating to understand the Metaverse as something parallel to the universe. In addition, translating "meta-" as "元" might be inaccurate, if not vague, as there is no evidence that the Metaverse could live up to the description. The prefix "meta-" has multiple meanings; it originally means "after" or "beyond" a certain entity. If "meta-" is to be understood as "beyond", then "metaverse" refers to a virtual "super world" above reality. If it is taken as "after", then the problem will become more complicated. The prefix, in the sense of "after", has acquired a specific meaning from the word "metaphysics". The word "metaphysics" is translated as "元物理学" in Chinese, with the character "元" corresponding to the prefix "meta- ". Similar translations have been applied to metalanguage ("元语言"), metamathematics ("元数学"), metalogic ("元逻辑"), metatheorem ("元定理"), etc. In these cases, "meta-" or "元" invariably refers to the ability of a system to comprehensively reflect upon and explain another. The former system is hence called a "metasystem" ("元系统") of the latter. Therefore, the translation "元宇宙" indicates that the Metaverse has the ability to facilitate the overall reflection and explanation of the real world, which is a rather astounding statement. Such ability is clearly far more advanced than the anticipated function of the Metaverse, and still a far stretch even with the infinite potential of technological development. In conclusion, a better interpretation of the Metaverse would be "beyond the world", and the corresponding Chinese translation would be "超世界" instead of "元宇宙" However, "元宇宙" has become a general translation of the Metaverse.

The Metaverse is conceptualized as a virtual world that corresponds with and is related to the real world. The ontological question thus arises: If there is at least one possible world beyond the real world that has the ability to achieve worldization and become a real being, then humans will be able to live simultaneously in no less than two possible worlds. More specifically, supported by advanced audiovisual technology and even touch and taste simulation, as well as blockchain, big data, artificial intelligence, and quantum technology, not to mention new technologies that are yet to come; it is not difficult at all to picture the tremendous energy of the Metaverse as a world. The digitalized "beings" in the Metaverse are virtual reality, a vividness created by various technologies that matches reality and thus brings about a "real" experience. The miracle indicates that "virtual reality" has the potential to virtually become another reality, which would constitute a magical shift from the virtual to the real. Though the Metaverse cannot replace the real world, it can challenge the

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3 With the original meaning of a poetry stanza or metrical part of a song, the word "verse" denotes a sense of order. Opposite to "verse" is "prose", which is a free writing style without a given order. In light of this, the word "uni-verse" means "of the same order", or a world where one order rules.

concept of "reality" and give significance to Putnam's thought experiment "Brain in a Vat",[4] which would otherwise be a boring pseudo-question in epistemology. More excitingly, many beings in the Metaverse are not advanced simulations of real-world counterparts. Instead, they are brand-new Metaverse creations that are physically unreal but have reality in terms of experience. A once theological question thus becomes a problem of reality: In the Metaverse, humans assume the role of God as the creator with the ability to create any digitalized virtual being. Whoever creates beings must explain their meaning. Then what is the meaning of creating virtual beings? Or further, what is the meaning of creating a virtual world? Such are the questions the creators must answer.

With regard to the "foretold death" of the real world at the hands of the Metaverse, I would like to offer my own predictive inference: If the Metaverse successfully "murders" the real world – that is, of course, in the sense of depreciation rather than destruction – it will still not be a possible world where everyone gets what they want or the "best possible world" in terms of logic. Instead, the Metaverse will very likely inherit the fundamental problems of the real world recursively and leave them unresolved. The troubles of humans will therefore be doubled in the future.

3   The Metaverse in a spectrum of possible worlds

In general ontology, any and all possible worlds are beings. Different from special ontology, which only admits the real world as a being, general ontology shares the same range as logic. The possible worlds in logic are at least beings in a pure sense, though not necessarily existences. The ontological problem of possibility versus reality takes root in Aristotle's modal logic. Later, Leibniz's concept of "possible worlds" established a clear standard for ontological analysis of the issue: There are numerous unreal possible worlds beyond the real world. In this sense, one may analyze any and all worlds in ontology, including the possible worlds of the future and the past, historical reconstruction, idealization, subjective projection, literary fiction, philosophical conceptualization, myths, and science fiction, defined by mathematical systems, or simulated through digitalization. All possible worlds, be they one-dimensional, two-dimensional, three-dimensional, or multidimensional, may become subjects of analysis.

The ontology that tolerates infinite or all possible worlds can be called general ontology, and the ontology limited to the real world can be called special ontology. If a world is real, then it ontologically "exists"; if a world is unreal, then it is only "present" from an ontological perspective. In both circumstances, the grammatical case can be "is" both ontologically and logically.

The real world is generally considered ontologically superior, which is rather obvious, considering that entities would have no place to exist without any real world. Of course, without the real world, the subject has nowhere to go. But the "real world" is an undefined concept. We usually take for granted that the real world is the same as the physical world. However, electronic data is also a physical existence. By this logic, the digitalized virtual world appears to be a real world, and the real-life experience in the virtual world seems to add to its reality. Hence, physicality and perceptibility are no longer sufficient to identify the real world. In my opinion, the real world is a world explained by biology. The survival of organisms constitutes the necessary and sufficient condition for a world to be real. That is to say, the real world is a physical world that can provide a living environment for life forms; it is thus conceptually narrower than the physical world. I have introduced the restraint of

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4 Putnam's thought experiment "Brain in a Vat" is not unsolvable. In fact, the answer lies in the problem itself (the known conditions): For the brain in the vat, since the virtual world is unreservedly experienced as real, it is, in any sense, equivalent to reality. From the perspective of the spectators and experimenters, the world of the captive brain is virtual; they know it, watch it, and even control it. Strictly speaking, Putnam has not put forward a question, but rather come up with a situation.

life because the concept of a real world is only meaningful in connection with life, or else the world would be a meaningless thing in itself (Ding an sich, if I may enlist the support of Kant). Therefore, only physical worlds that constitute a sufficient condition for the survival of life can be called a real world. The real world is a function of life and exists for the sake of it.

My definition of the real world may not be the best, but it has one benefit: The introduction of life can help create a coordinate system to pinpoint reality; that is, reality can be determined based on the relationship between the physical world and life, or else ambiguity persists in the concept of reality. When there is a distance between fact and concept, it is more convincing to approach the fact by amending the concept than the opposite, so it is the concept of the real world that needs to be modified. As the concept of the real world is an accepted traditional concept, and my new definition is yet to be recognized, to avoid confusion, we may call the real world with life forms as opposed to the virtual world the "genuine world".

The Metaverse will tell the story of how a possible world influences and even invades the genuine world. The genuine world is not only unguarded against the Metaverse, part of its residents are even producers and "moles" of the latter. The Metaverse is bound to drive straight in and "abduct" the genuine world.

The story of "interworld abduction" will affect the entire genuine world and the life of everyone inside, so it will not be a science fiction of alien kidnaps or wormholes between two universes.

Humans are glad to find historical clues for each story and make it seem deep-rooted. In merging new creations into old concepts and experiences, a sense of epistemological safety is obtained, while minute yet decisive differences are ignored. In truth, even the tiniest innovation may be revolutionary. Just think about the human genes and those of many other animals: In some cases, there is only a 10% or even 5% difference. I believe the situation also applies to the Metaverse, as it has been traced back to generations of literature and science fiction, and myths that originated thousands of years ago. Hinted by the retrospect is that as humans have always been fantasizing about possible worlds or utopias that are better than the real world, the Metaverse might well be the latest possible world that "we" want today. But historical retrospect can be stretched beyond justification. Just like "a friend of a friend of a friend" is unlikely to be a trustworthy friend, the "spectrum" is sometimes insufficient to attest to consistency.

The problem concerns a basic question of the philosophy of history: How do we understand continuity and break in history? From the perspective of possible worlds, myths, fairy tales, fiction, and the Metaverse are all members of the spectrum of possible worlds and thus share similar genes of the clan; however, the problems, intentionality, and purposes of these possible worlds present a complexity that can hardly be surmised. Between myths, fairy tales, fiction, and the Metaverse, there are both an iterative continuity and a contemporary break. History has in itself a certain iterative quality. Humans' fundamental problems are recursive in historical development, which is hardly surprising, as the fundamental problems of life are necessary happenings that will not disappear regardless of the living style. Problems such as birth, aging, sickness, and death, rise, decline, survival, and demise, war and peace, conflict and cooperation, power and interest, freedom and rules, or sense and sensibility can never be resolved, nor will there be an ultimate answer, so they will always exist in a recursive manner. Meanwhile, every possible world has its own unique problems. For example, Jorge Luis Borges once envisioned a world based on psychology, where everything is understood in an idealistic manner, and the Three-Body world of Liu Cixin features complete transparency of thoughts and the nonexistence of deceptions or promises. So, what is the problem of the Metaverse?

In the spectrum or set of possible worlds, the Metaverse will probably become an exception different from any possible world before it. The all-encompassing Metaverse will certainly inherit the impulsion and desires featured in myths, fairy tales, literature, and science fiction, which are

especially prominent in virtual games. However, the games in the Metaverse will not have meaning or depth simply because they have inherited human fantasies.

Though things may have changed, the problems remain. Of course, the sensual technologies of virtual reality will render the games in the Metaverse more interesting in form. But the change in entertainment does not merit discussion, unless we are to discuss the regression of intelligence resulting from pan-entertainment. More importantly, the difference between the Metaverse and past works of fiction is ontological rather than purely literal.

If the fictional possible worlds are jointly called "literature" — by literature I mean a methodology to construct possible worlds rather than the aggregate qualities of literary works — then a basic quality of literature as methodology is its surrealism that attempts to improve on reality. The Metaverse is different in that it is both surrealistic and antirealistic. By constructing a world in another dimension, the Metaverse will deal a "dimensionality reduction strike" to the genuine world. It is obvious that literature and the Metaverse have different objects of desire. The "literature" has not lost interest in the genuine world; even the most eccentric myths or fairy tales are a manner of explanation or anticipation of the genuine world. On the other hand, the Metaverse intends to construct another world, a possible world with different principles, construction, laws, and values. Therefore, the world of the Metaverse is an "antirealistic world". Not only does the Metaverse have no intention to change the real world, it even abominates reality. This is diametrical to how literature expresses its discontent with the real world by fuming at its lack of change. Literature is a kind of idealism that cares for the real world, while the Metaverse is the constructivism of an "antirealistic world".

The possible worlds of literary fiction are only objects of epistemology, for the "migration of life" cannot be realized in such worlds; they are objects of the cogito, rather than the facio. On the contrary, the Metaverse concerns not only epistemology, but also ontology. It attempts to break through the boundaries of epistemology and enter the realm of ontology, thus becoming an object of the facio. Advertisements of the Metaverse tend to emphasize the vivid experience it offers with the help of technologies. It is to be an open possible world that can "visualize" an infinite number of scenarios, which makes it sensually attractive. The Metaverse also has a sociological advantage. It is said that people have more freedom of choice in the Metaverse: They not only have more open options under the same identity, but are also capable of choosing multiple identities freely. Whereas humans cannot transcend their biological nature and create doppelgangers in the genuine world, they can choose different avatars and become multiple individuals in the Metaverse according to their own will, thereby acquiring more opportunities to be the person they wish to become. This is claimed to be the most attractive social status of the Metaverse. However, be it the ultimate sensual experience or the freedom of identity, such characteristics are essentially "entertaining" or symbolistic.

They are a new world's ways of experience, but not its substance. The substance of a world lies in its resources, capital, economic relationships, political system, and knowledge production. Therefore, what is more important — and also suspicious — is that the Metaverse will possibly become a more efficient world in terms of economic and financial activities, information or knowledge production and sharing, public choices, and political governance. There is no telling whether the efficiency will reach its maximum, but the transaction costs and information asymmetry are sure to be relieved, and the controllability of various orders, such as financial credit and safety, will be enhanced. But these technological advantages are more conducive to control than to freedom.

Whether or not the above status is beneficial, the Metaverse is bound to become a major variable that will revolutionize the definition and explanation of life. Admittedly, the Metaverse is a virtual world vastly different from the genuine world. However, it is by no means a so-called "parallel"

world unrelated to or separated from the latter. Quite the opposite, the Metaverse will be a superimposed world that tries to manipulate the genuine world. A strange ontological relationship thus arises: The Metaverse created by the genuine world rules over its creator, resulting in reflexivity between the two worlds. The novel reflexivity is not an epistemological reflection or explanation, but a practical reflexive control. In other words, the genuine world has created a Metaverse that is used to control or even oppress itself, which is similar to a person choosing to enter servitude out of their own free will. As epistemology cannot effectively explain practical reflexivity, it is necessary to analyze the Metaverse from an ontological perspective. The Metaverse, so to speak, may become an epoch-making ontological event that will to a large extent topple the authority of modern epistemology. It will force us to return to the original question of ontology and answer the following questions anew: How will the Metaverse change the life in the genuine world? Are the fundamental problems of the Metaverse the same as the genuine world? Does the Metaverse require a new ontology?

4   If the metaverse becomes an ontological event

The Metaverse is, first of all, a contemporary event. A common mistake is to confuse contemporariness with presentness. All beings are present. Both memories of the past and imaginations of the future are "happening", or temporally present. But what is present may not be contemporary. Of the numerous happenings at present, very few are contemporary. And the Metaverse is a typical contemporary event.

An obvious characteristic of contemporariness is the "early arrival of the future". Rather than an epistemological prediction, it is a concrete action of invading the future. Contemporariness is not concerned with the intentional cogito, but the facio that actually creates the future. Here, actions become futuristic tokens, endorsing the future in advance. While the cogito only reflects in the present, the facio attempts to kidnap time and force it to obey present actions. It marks the natural duration of time with plans by means of registration. Though the future is always contingent and not ensured by any action, actions that form a "trend" do have the ability to seize the power of time and attach future possibilities to present actions, resulting in the early arrival of the future.

Seizing the future has always been one of those things that humans are most interested in. One may even find the intention in ancient oracle bone scripts. "Future" is written as "未来" in Chinese, which has corresponding characters in the oracle bone script. The ancient character of "来" was modeled on wheat. To plant wheat is to seize the future; it is essentially a plan of temporal colonization. On the other hand, the character "未" was taken from a fruit tree yet to bear fruits. Put together, "未" leaves room for contingency against the promise of "来" in the word "未来". Agricultural technologies, steam machines, electric machinery, computers, and the Internet in the past; artificial intelligence, quantum technology, and the Metaverse under development··· Such is the list of powerful means for seizing the future. It is easy to see that technology has always played an important role. As technology continues to gain power, the reserved future has shifted from a sign of progress to a warning of risks. Today, technical risks have increased tremendously, while the ability to control them is disproportionately lacking. In other words, humans have the power to accomplish astonishing deeds, yet lack the ability to judge which deeds are worthy. Such has always been a lurking peril of human intelligence. We have never been certain about the judgment between right and wrong. One may say that we never know chalk from cheese when it comes to questions of values. The significant imbalance between technological power and reflective ability is the fundamental flaw of humans as creators. It would appear that we have long been aware of our intellectual defect, hence the conceptualization of an omniscient and omnipotent god.

In our knowledge structure, the "fundamental problems" that lack an epistemological answer or any kind of answer at all are assigned to philosophy for reflection. Philosophy has thus become a "discipline" specializing in researching unanswerable questions. In fact, philosophy has never managed to solve any fundamental question. All it ever does is reflect. As Wittgenstein once asked, "If somebody scratches the spot where he has an itch, do we have to see some progress?" Humans have always been faced with a fundamental dilemma: Whereas technological ability continues to advance, our philosophical ability has never improved accordingly. In particular, there is always an ideological bottleneck with judgments regarding the future and values. The problems of future and value judgment that Hume once put forward still lack a convincing solution.

The ideological dilemma was not pronounced in ancient times, so people mistook philosophy for noble but futile learning. As primitive technologies in the past did not possess the potential for unbearable destruction, they stroke an acceptable balance with unthorough thinking. Today, technological power has far exceeded the ability of thought and of risk management. Risks grow in proportion to technological development, yet the ability to control sails in the other direction. Therefore, human survival is increasingly endangered by risks. We have always dedicated ourselves to developing technologies for increasing benefits, convenience, and pleasure, but scarcely explored the principles and technologies of risk control. Humanity entered a risk society (coined by Anthony Giddens) long ago. The underlying problem is that humans have become "risk humans"; in other words, we ourselves are the producers of risks. Artificial intelligence, genetic technology, and the Metaverse are the most tempting technological adventures in recent years. We can predict the benefits of these technologies, but cannot control their risks.

Therefore, in addition to researching the Metaverse from economic, sociological, and political perspectives, it is also necessary to analyze the revolutions and risks it brings about on a metaphysical level. The Metaverse is not just any contemporary event. It will very probably become an ontological event. The so-called "ontological event" is not an epistemological classification of events, but rather a label that marks an event's power. Any event, be it epistemological, economic, political, or technological, may be called an ontological or world-creating event, as long as its creational or "revolutionary" power suffices for a systematic or overall change in human existence. If an event is identified as an ontological event, then it must contain the starting point of some new problem, and thus constitute a new source of human life and thoughts; in other words, the event establishes a point of creation for human existence. As a Chinese saying goes, "If the cosmos remains unchanged, then so do the laws (天不变道亦不变)." In this manner of speech, the ontological event is an incident that changes the "laws" or the "cosmos".

Human life features continuous creativity, but the changes are mainly gradual; radical shifts that could reach the level of "ontological event" are not common. The "ontological events" in history include at least the following: (1) The invention of language (including written letters and characters), which laid the foundation for all of humanity's creations and knowledge to come. The critical link is the invention of negators (e.g., not). With the negators came the concept of possibility and thus the infinite set of possible worlds, making negators a necessary condition of thought for all creations. (2) The invention of production technologies, including those in agriculture, animal husbandry, handicraft, and engineering. These technologies paved the way for all technological developments in the future. The technology to harness nature brought with it the concept of the future, which resulted in the invention of human time, or a timetable based on human affairs and plans.

The timetable is the foundation of the concept of history. Prior to the invention of a planned future, life had merely been a natural process, with time going by in an infinite repetition of the present tense or an unending loop of day and night and the four seasons. The concept of the future had been meaningless. (3) The invention of logic and mathematics. These are the universal and

necessary rules the mind established for itself. They are the second intellectual revolution after language and the greatest epistemological event. The advent of logic and mathematics far predates the invention of geometry or logic as a discipline. The study of logic is the theorization of logical ability, and the same goes for geometry. Both Aristotle's logic and Euclid's axiomatic geometry are milestones of knowledge, but neither is an ontological event. (4) The invention of institutions, including political institutions, distribution systems, ethical institutions, and public rules. In establishing rationalized institutions for life, humans invented society, which is the greatest political event. There would be no society without order, and life would be unable to rise above inefficient survival. The most important achievement of order is the establishment of technical conditions for trust. With these conditions, trust, once none other than a psychological belief, can be described and operated in a technical manner. (5) The invention of science. With science, humans have developed theories on beings, which form a unified order of knowledge established by the mind. In addition, the knowledge chain that can be repeatedly verified and successfully demonstrated without contingency is another greatest epistemological event.

If we were to analyze the ontological events that created civilization in more detail, then all marvelous creations would be ontological events, and the list would go on forever. The idea of constructing order with "creations (作)" was first put forward in *Book of Changes: Appended Remarks II* (I Ching: Xi Ci II) and *Book of Origins: Inventors* (Shiben: Zuo). The two works also provide a list of remarkable creations in early civilization. In the history of civilization, the use of fire and water (irrigation), houses, wheels, textile, farm tools, manufacturing, steam machines, electricity, nuclear power, the Internet, etc., as well as those that are still under development such as artificial intelligence, genetic technology, quantum technology, and controllable nuclear fusion are ontological events that have changed or will change people's lives.

The question now is whether the Metaverse will become an ontological event. The final answer to this question remains to be given in the future. Admittedly, the Metaverse still has some way to go at present, but since the prospect is far from impossible, we may as well deal with the question in advance. The Metaverse per se is not a technological invention, but the aggregate and cooperation of multiple technologies, including sensory simulation technologies, the Internet, blockchain, big data, artificial intelligence, and quantum technology. In other words, rather than a single technology, the Metaverse has invented a boundless open platform of "technology+", where all compatible new technologies can have a place. Therefore, the Metaverse will be a technology hub that has the potential to build a new world with an adequate aggregation of technologies. Whereas language has created the abstract being of multiple possible worlds, the Metaverse is very likely to invent the first possible world that comes to reality. A digital or information-based possible world gains reality the moment it can be experienced. In that case, the possible world is not only in the mind, logic, mathematics, or fiction, but for the first time superimposed on the genuine world, loaded with real power. Possible worlds will no longer be a kind of idle theorization that cannot be accessed, but an accessible and changeable practical being. New economic, political, and philosophical problems are sure to follow.

5   Will Descartes wake up laughing?

The Metaverse seems to be a world that realizes idealism. It appears to provide empirical proof for mind-body dualism and the status of the cogito as an independent entity. Will the news wake Descartes up from his slumber and put a smile on his face?

Generally speaking, compared with empiricists, it is relatively easier for idealists to provide a logically correct argument. This should not come as a surprise, considering that it would be much

simpler to start from the cogito and establish an argument on the internal nature of self than to prove the existence of the outside world. The consistency and completeness of self can be explained using resources inherent to the concept of cogito. But one cannot use the cogito to demonstrate the consistency and completeness of the outside world, which does not belong to the cogito. Such is the shortcoming of idealism: The lack of empirical evidence. However, the Metaverse seems to provide the empirical proof that idealism desperately requires. It is to create a virtual world where the free mind calls the shots, while the unfree body is left in the genuine world.

The body is one with life, and the mind is one with intention. Idealists believe that subjectivity lies in the mind rather than the body. However, the mind by itself, without the help of bodily actions, cannot change the world freely, nor can it choose life or body. This means that life and body are, after all, the basis and constraint of the mind's being. Perhaps the unfree life and body have "encumbered" the free mind. But without them, the mind will have nothing to rely on. Nevertheless, the Metaverse is currently trying to work its magic and create a world that transcends material constraints, where the mind can be independent of the body. There need not be any worry about the material shortage, as digitalized materials are infinitely bountiful. The vision sounds like a hybrid miracle of communism and liberalism. According to the myth, the mind of every individual can achieve complete freedom in the Metaverse. One may freely choose and define their digitalized beings and select any identity or multiple identities according to their own will. They can all have the freedom to become the person they wish to be. It is a myth where the power of government is replaced by the free and equal rights of all, as well as a metaphysical application of "I think, therefore I am". But is it really a credible and reasonable story?

My first question would be the cost. As people can freely register and construct any identity in the Metaverse and enjoy the more diversified and pleasant experiences it has to offer, their bodies may be reduced to mere "containers". In other words, they may neglect their bodies because their minds can obtain experiences in the Metaverse that are better than any bodily experience. If the distinctions in experience and social status determined by bodily differences in the genuine world were to grow insignificant, and the mind could obtain whatever experience it seeks, then the body would become a residue of humans in the genuine world or a mere container. Therefore, the genuine world and the Metaverse would enter the Cartesian division of labor, where the body is left in the genuine world as the mind is attributed to the Metaverse. As a result, all the value that remains in the genuine world would be survival, with the body serving the single purpose of sustaining life. All the significance, value, and spirit of being would be given to the Metaverse — provided that such significance and spirit still remained. The genuine world would also descend into ruins as the bodies are reduced into containers. If the bodies and the genuine world no longer mattered, then Foucault's questions of human nature would disappear. It is still hard to tell whether life would become a fairy tale or a disaster.

The Metaverse may turn the problem of "cross-worldly entities", which had hitherto only an entertaining value, into a real problem. All natural persons have a singular "self" and therefore a singular subjectivity. If a person can freely construct multiple identities in the Metaverse, will they have multiple subjectivities? Is the identity in the genuine world identical to the multiple identities in the Metaverse? Will the multiple identities share one self, or will there be multiple selves? Can multiple identities or multiple selves be identified as one subject? The situation gives rise to a new metaphysical problem: If the multiple identities still fall under the same self, then the identities cannot be considered multiple persons from a metaphysical perspective, for they are mere pretenses on a physical level. Pretense identities are not a novelty, as a common fraud may have different cover identities. On the other hand, if the multiple identities redefine multiple selves, then I will not be "I" – a person may become an infinite group of people, and I may be anyone. This will result in a paradox of subjectivity: If one subject could turn into a random number of subjects, then

subjectivity would no longer exist. The very meaning of subjectivity lies in its uniqueness. Uniqueness is the necessary condition of subjectivity. Without uniqueness, there would be no subjectivity. To have multiple persons and yet remain consistent is the power of God. God is a Trinity and exists ubiquitously in all beings, but humans cannot. We are not prohibited from doing so, but simply incapable of it. If humans could have multiple subjectivities, then all vices could be done by the substitutes. Admittedly, free crime is not allowed in any world, so perhaps subjectivity with its uniqueness will only exist in legal entities, while the subjectivity of the mind is left to split. Mental illness may become a common problem in the Metaverse era.

The metaphysical basis of mental illness is the split of subjectivity. The split of subjectivity is innate to civilization. It comes from the distance between facts and concepts, reality and dream, as well as "what I am" and "what I wish to be". The split is originally an essential condition for creativity rather than an illness. For a long time, the social norms of "what I should be" (superego) have restricted or suppressed "what I am" (ego); therefore, mental illness is not prevalent. Then modernity devised a subjectivity inconsistent with or even separated from the subject. As subjectivity was endowed with the sovereignty of value, the ego ceased to heed the command of the superego in pursuit of the idealized subjectivity that almost negated the genuine subject. The result is that reality became increasingly unacceptable, and radical ideals turned into absolute callings. In the end, the subject was still unable to realize its subjectivity, despite the struggles for rights and power, the reforms of the distribution system, the politics of acknowledgment, and the social or cultural revolutions. Absolute subjectivity still remains a concept that can only be envisioned, but not achieved, by the subject, and is far from reality. Because modernity created a subjectivity that cannot be realized, the concept of subjectivity came to define the "ultimate human" that has never become a reality, and in doing so, negated the genuine subjects. In this sense, mental illness is primarily a modern disease. Generally speaking, the insuperable reality is an objective restriction of madness. However, the Metaverse may achieve an ontological breakthrough. It will create an ontological gap "between worlds", and cross-worldly entities will thus reach the critical point where their minds begin to split.

The Metaverse, with its ability to transcend the limitations of physics and biology, surpasses the genuine world infinitely in terms of possibility. By means of technology, it can "visualize" or even create out of thin air an endless array of idealized, perfected, or even radicalized things, and offer a greater abundance of extreme experiences that are more thrilling. Hence, the Metaverse will become the ideal model of genuine things; that is to say, things should be as they are in the Metaverse. Genuine things covered with flaws pale in comparison with those in the Metaverse. As a result, the genuine world will experience its first real depreciation in history with regard to the meaning of life, aesthetics, and ethics. Previously, the heavens of religious or utopian imagination only simulate the best possibility of the genuine world, which is not enough to cause its depreciation. However, the Metaverse may deal an "ontological degrading or dimensionality reduction strike" to the genuine world and the genuine life. Though it is still difficult to predict the actual outcome at present, one may draw a somewhat inaccurate analogy: The pleasure brought by narcotics has surpassed that of sex, food, and creation, and to a certain extent resulted in the depreciation of real life. People reject narcotics due to their health hazards. If they were harmless to health, there would probably be no restrictions.

Yet the Metaverse is indeed "harmless". Precisely because of its harmlessness, it may incur damages humans cannot resist. The Metaverse can generate experiences that are far more colorful, especially extreme experiences one would not dare try in the genuine world, such as those that are dangerous, cruel, or pervert but immensely tempting. Therefore, it has the charm to lure people into "amusing themselves to death". This could be explained with the help of an aesthetical theorem: As long as safety is guaranteed, horrifying extreme experiences may become aesthetical and

"sublime" (just think about the rollercoasters and bungee jumping in amusement parks). The genuine world that has lost its luster will devolve into a mechanical or animalistic world merely centered on material production and life sustainment, deprived of spirit, meaning, and experience. If people were to survive in the genuine world and live in the Metaverse, what kind of experience would it be to separate "survival" from "life"? Would it result in amentia? Maybe it would lead to something even severer: The indulgence in virtual experience may cause the degeneration of rationality and the intellect. Though I do not have any evidence to prove the point, I may provide a possible deduction: Virtual experiences are created by humans. If we were to abandon the experiences in the genuine world, then the source of new experiences would be cut off. The so-called infinite virtual experiences would necessarily be the endless involutional repetitions within the boundaries of given routines, with nothing innovative despite the astonishing amount (the phenomenon is in fact already perceivable in video games). Therefore, the mental involution of the virtual world may eventually turn humans into idiots. Only rational thinking and genuine experiences are infinite.

Further, the cross-worldly "migration of life" into the Metaverse may lead to the end of history in the genuine world. With the continuous diminishment of stories in real life, most of life will migrate into the Metaverse. Will the Metaverse have the ability to generate a new "post-world" history? Or perhaps we should ask: Does the Metaverse need a history? In addition, according to the optimistic propaganda, the Metaverse seems to have what it takes to realize everyone's freedom and dreams. From a conceptual perspective, the game of life in the Metaverse will remove the cruelty, inequality, and injustice of competition in the genuine world. It is somewhat similar to that fine game of Axelrod's, in which participants only gamble to win or lose without risking their lives and thus always have another chance. But the question is, is the Metaverse really a game of such a nature? Will the fundamental problems of the Metaverse be entirely different from those of the genuine world? What kind of motivation or ability does the Metaverse have to change the fundamental problems of humanity?

6   Recursion of the ontological problem: New world and old problem

Builders of the Metaverse may be right about one thing: In the future, most people will be more interested in the Metaverse than in the genuine world.

This will be proven by the "traffic of mind". The "traffic of mind" refers to people's distribution of time. Our way of being lies in the way we invest time. The amount of time invested is the most basic ontological index of life. But "traffic" is a standard of statistics rather than a set of values. If something is enjoyed by the majority of people, it only means that "the thing is widely popular" and by no means implies that "the thing is good" or "the thing can be achieved".

Time is the scarcest resource. In the Metaverse, though the problem of scarcity does not apply to the infinite digitalized resources, the use or possession of any resource must still be realized through finite time. Time is the limit to the efficacy of any resource, so the scarcity of time means that people cannot make full use of the infinite resources. Time is of such a nature that we cannot do two things simultaneously. Everyone must use their finite time of life as an investment to exchange for the things or experiences they want. The production from time investment is the value of time. Whichever possible world the traffic flows to, our time is limited, and so are the profits we can reap from time. Therefore, although the Metaverse and the genuine world are two possible worlds that actors can shift between according to their own will, we can still choose only one possible life in any time period of $t_0 - t_n$. In terms of ontology, the kind of time an actor has is singular — it is limited by life. Whatever an actor does occupies the time of life. Because there is only one kind of time, even if

people could enter multiple possible worlds and add to themselves several identities, as long as the nature of time remains the same, increasing the number of possible worlds cannot add possible lives. Metaphysically speaking, adding possible worlds does not result in another ontology. Perhaps a person can turn into multiple subjects in the Metaverse and set identities in auto-mode that "does not occupy time", or ask artificial intelligence to manage some identities on their behalf. But such maneuvers still fail to "conjure" more time for the subjects. Though the Metaverse can build a boundless virtual space, it is still incapable of providing infinite time. Time remains the hard core of ontology that cannot be altered, and the subject's finite time is the insuperable ontological boundary. Therefore, the Metaverse necessarily shares the same ontology with the genuine world, and along with it, similar fundamental problems, especially those of politics, economy, and ethics.

As the singularity of time entails that humans cannot simultaneously achieve two goals or above, we will always face "choices". Be it two options, multiple options, or infinite options, we can only choose one of them. While multiple options are regarded as signifying freedom, and infinite options absolute freedom, the quality of choice does not necessarily increase with the abundance of options.

People often become more confused in the presence of many options. They may even follow in the steps of "Buridan's ass". "The more, the merrier" only applies to options when the subject is omniscient and omnipotent. As assumed in theology, God can go through an infinite number of possible worlds in the blink of an eye, which is why He could easily pick out the best possible world. For humans with finite intelligence, choice-making has always been a fundamental difficulty or even the greatest one.

The choice is the ontological foundation of human destiny. The status is determined by the first event of human ontology, namely the invention of negators. [5] As discussed in a prior section, negators opened the concept of possibility and invented the infinite set of possible worlds. As a result, the human mind transcended the concept of necessity for the first time, became a creative being, and established an ontology with modality. Even today, we still live in the modal framework. With the invention of possibility came choices, which gave rise to the preferential ordering of options and the creation of values. This is the cause of all the conflicts between humans, the inner conflicts of self, and all the problems in economy, politics, society, culture, psychology, and thought. Without transcending the paradox of the singularity of time and the multiplicity of choices, there will never be a new ontology. Therefore, the fundamental problems of life in the Metaverse will be similar to those in the genuine world; in other words, the fundamental problems in the genuine world will manifest in the Metaverse in a recursive manner. "If the cosmos remains unchanged, then so do the laws." By the same token, if the actors remain the same, so do the fundamental problems.

Undoubtedly, there will be salient differences in experience between the Metaverse and the genuine world. Foremost are the vivid experiences created by sensory technologies (visual reality and others). Then there are also the free choice of identity and access to information in an infinite digitalized space, as well as the credit and social system created and guaranteed jointly by blockchain, big data, artificial intelligence, and so forth. The technological changes are enough to result in alterations on a social level; they are very likely to alter the social structure. I see the Metaverse the same way I understand high-tech society: Service is power. The Metaverse is an upgraded version of the Internet world. It is a service platform that is almost all-encompassing and all-mighty, with functions so complete that the platform can become a "world". From this perspective, the Metaverse is sure to become a new opportunity for capital. Financial capital will most probably monopolize all services and prove that "service is power" by controlling the real world through the virtual world and the user terminals through medium monopoly, thus turning the service system into a technical system for exerting control over everyone.

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5 See Zhao Tingyang: Forking Possibilities, East China Normal University Press, 2017 ed., pp. 38 - 67.

Medium systems are the key to civilization and a favorite in power contests. The story begins with language. As the largest medium system, language represents everything, always acts as an agent, and finally controls everything. Confucius once said, "If terminology is not corrected, then what is said cannot be followed. If what is said cannot be followed, then work cannot be accomplished." The saying might be the best summary of the position of language. The first language of civilization is natural language, and the newest is digitalized language or the language of the Metaverse. To control the Metaverse is to control the new language, thus the means of communication and the flow of information between minds, and eventually the interactions among humans, between humans and objects, and among objects. Since the Metaverse is the most convenient platform for everything, all mediums will be transplanted there. At that point, the Metaverse will develop an advanced organizational ability and a social character stronger than those of the genuine world. Meanwhile, the genuine world will become fragmented, as individuals become isolated in genuine life; only in the Metaverse will they be able to establish various connections, interactions, and transactions. In comparison with the genuine world, in which the texture of life is impaired, the Metaverse will eventually become the new and only society that has a complete system.

If the Metaverse were to grow from a service platform to a world or society, it would reexplain interpersonal relationships or the worldly relationships of every individual. Some say that the Metaverse can reduce homogeneous competition by mostly eliminating it for resources such as identity, information, opportunities, and services. However, homogeneous competition is bound to persist with regard to resources whose value is closely related to uniqueness, exclusivity, or finiteness, especially power, capital, and influence, for these resources will always be scarce. Therefore, in the Metaverse, homogeneous competition is only removed for things that are "entertaining"; it still remains for everything of significant value due to the scarcity of resources. Hence the laws of things relating to interests and power, or economy and politics, cannot be different in the Metaverse from those in the genuine world. It will not be surprising if "bad things" continue to happen in the Metaverse as they do in the genuine world, for people have long been used to a "bad world". The problem is that they expect from the Metaverse "good things" that are impossible in the genuine world.

According to the technical vision, the Metaverse can establish all relationships in a traceable and provable manner with clear information. They will almost be as clear and credible as logic, for the combination of blockchain, artificial intelligence, and quantum technology will ensure that the financial and transactional relationships are "absolutely credible". If the statement were true, it would be a marvelous achievement of the Metaverse. But the absolute credibility of technology is a promise that is not quite credible.

As a Chinese saying goes, "While the priest climbs a post, the devil climbs ten." Such is the competition of technology. No technology is invincible and without a loophole, just like there is no unstoppable spear or impenetrable shield. It is hard to tell whether the technologies that support blockchain, artificial intelligence, and quantum cryptography can in turn be used to attack the system, or whether there will be newer technologies. Yet from a historical perspective, the "spear" has always been one step ahead of the "shield" in development (taking the example of weaponry). But we cannot be sure if the situation with the Metaverse will fit in with the historical mode. The reason why we must take a noncommittal skeptical attitude is that the Metaverse has a new ontological basis, which makes it different from the physical world. It is said that the ontological status of the Metaverse is in essence "completely" mathematical, and the relationships, rationality, and credibility of any being defined by mathematics are different from those of the genuine world. As the credit system and relationships in the Metaverse are mathematically impeccable, and math never lies, the "behaviors" in the Metaverse must be mathematically legitimate. That is to say, all behaviors in the Metaverse must obey mathematical laws, or else they would be invalid in a factual

rather than ethical way. From this perspective, it should be impossible to do evil in the Metaverse. However, this rationale cannot put me at ease. Maybe the mathematical Metaverse cannot do evil by itself, but there is no guarantee that it will not be a tool for perpetuating evil. Though history cannot prove the future, it at least gives us signs for prediction. Even if a technology based on mathematics could truly establish a system without loopholes, the system that controlled all would still be more conducive to the formation of despotism. Clearly, the more powerful a system, the more helpful it would be for the development of despotism rather than freedom.

Many Metaverse dreams reek of technology terrorism. On the surface, the Metaverse will offer more freedom and equality, as well as infinite information and resources. But behind all the benefits lies a "systematic power", or despotic order, defined collusively by capital and technology. According to unverified myths, the tech geeks behind the Metaverse are anti-despotic. They aspire to topple all centers of despotism by building a decentralized Metaverse. Advocates of such ideas may have read too much Orwell. Nevertheless, Orwell knew only of the dangers of a despotic government, but not those of a tyrannic technology system. Taking into consideration executive capacity, a technology system is actually better equipped than the government to establish total despotism. I have a hunch that is yet to be demonstrated: The Metaverse will very likely reach the climax of the modern tide of freedom and equality, and then become the turning point that marks the fall into a new despotism trinity of global capital, advanced technologies, and "omnipresent systems". The turning point can be called "Plato's point".

Plato once put forward a cyclic political prophecy that is hard to demonstrate but repeatedly proven correct by experience. He said that all political systems have advantages but will invariably degenerate with time (worn out by use) and be replaced by another. For example, when democracy is worn out, it will return to autocracy and despotism. Despite its explanatory power, Plato's cyclic political formula leaves us with the difficult job of finding the conditions under which the turning point – Plato's point – will emerge. I suspect that the "omnipresent systems" (the all-encompassing Metaverse platform) formed by attracting global capital and advanced technologies will be a known Plato's point. It is predictable that a successful Metaverse platform will very probably have more power and hegemony than any state. Modern people fear the state's power out of inertia. In fact, the state's power is gradually dwindling, while non-state "systems" are vigorously growing to be a new power that surpasses the state.

There is one more question that we cannot ignore. Though the Metaverse can add new experiences, it may not have the ability to establish new values, for it cannot eliminate competition regarding interests, power, and influence. I will only discuss one point here. The Metaverse must also define some worthy values for life — nobody is interested in games without value — so it must create inequality. According to the theory of value, some things have "inner value"; in other words, they are valuable per se and need not prove their value through comparison with others. Such are the things that "are good in themselves". However, these things are not in abundance. They basically fall into the true, the good, and the beautiful, all of which are in short supply. Most values are "relational values" or values of comparison. They can only be defined by comparing with each other. Without comparison, most things will lose value. Therefore, people need to rank things to determine their value (preferential ordering); as ordering implies discrimination, one might as well call the ranking "chain of discrimination". Without discrimination, there would be no value. More specifically, if there were no discrimination, then the value of most things would disappear. The situation would be similar to rent dissipation. Though people are against discrimination everywhere, the truth remains that discrimination defines value. Besides, everyone discriminates. People are merely against those discriminatory behaviors that are disadvantageous to them. If the Metaverse intends to offer any possible life that contains the value, it will not be able to transcend the problem of discrimination. Suppose the Metaverse were determined to realize absolute equality of everyone

in any aspect, then it would definitely generate an "impossible life" or a life with dissolved meaning. In that case, the game would be over before it could begin. The key is that absolute equality will result in the offset of equal values, thus bringing about a new kind of rent dissipation and simultaneously dissolution of the meaning of life. People fight against inequality, but only inequality can determine value. Such is the destined paradox of any possible life, to which neither the genuine world nor the Metaverse can be an exception.

7   Epilogue: A good news foretold

The Metaverse guarantees benefits unavailable in the genuine world, but it can hardly escape difficulties similar to those in the latter. History has shown that human civilization is adept at increasing the good, but has its weakness in eliminating the bad. The prospects of the Metaverse are still unknown. If we take a neutral attitude and view the Metaverse as a way of conceiving the future, I am willing to accept that the technology has the potential to build a "Metaverse Library" that may achieve the maximization of knowledge.

The Metaverse Library will give birth to an epistemological concept with "new encyclopedia" and "syntext" as principles. It is a tribute to Borges' "Library of Babel", Warburg's concept of the library, as well as the encyclopedists of Diderot and Jean le Rond d'Alembert. I am certain that such a library will be a center of knowledge that everyone can benefit from. I could think of no other thing achievable of the Metaverse that is good without reservation. And I will have to discuss it in another article.